

Media Contact: Deborah Wormser

214-648-3404

deborah.wormser@utsouthwestern.edu

UT Southwestern biochemist receives new NIH Early Independence Award

DALLAS – Oct. 17, 2011 – Dr. Randal Halfmann, a research scientist at UT Southwestern Medical Center, is one of 10 investigators selected for the first National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director's Early Independence Awards.

The new program allows creative early-career scientists to leapfrog the traditional postdoctoral training period by providing funding to conduct independent investigations. The charter group of awardees will share approximately \$19.3 million to support their research projects over a five-year period.

"The Early Independence Award enables outstanding investigators to establish their independent research careers as soon as possible," said NIH Director Dr. Francis S. Collins. "These recipients have demonstrated exceptional scientific creativity and productivity."

Dr. Halfmann, a Sara and Frank McKnight Independent Postdoctoral Fellow who came to UT Southwestern in January, said, "I'm very grateful for this opportunity, especially receiving the award at UT Southwestern, where I have found such a supportive environment for my work."

Dr. Halfmann earned his doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, working in the laboratory of Dr. Susan Lindquist at the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge. There, he published a paper on the beneficial effects in yeast of misfolded proteins called prions, which were once thought to be only associated with disease.

The McKnight Fellowship is named in honor of the parents of Dr. Steven McKnight, Chairman of Biochemistry, who conducted similar independent research at the start of his career at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington, D.C. The McKnight Fellowship provides three years of funding and allows recipients such as Dr. Halfmann to immediately begin conducting independent research.

"It is fantastic that he will receive one of the NIH Director's Early Independence Awards," Dr. McKnight said. "The competition for these awards was fierce, especially in this inaugural year. This accomplishment brings honor to Dr. Halfmann, the Department of Biochemistry,

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and UT Southwestern as an institution.”

A graduate of Texas A&M University, Dr. Halfmann grew up in the west Texas town of Coleman – where he was valedictorian of his high school class.

Dr. Rodney C. Samaco of Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston also received Early Independence Award support.

Other recipients were from the University of California, San Francisco; the Carnegie Institution for Science; Harvard University; Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle; Stanford University School of Medicine; the University of Washington School of Public Health, Seattle; and the Wyss Institute/Harvard Medical School.

Information on the award is available at <http://commonfund.nih.gov/earlyindependence>.

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